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ABSTRACT

Despite the fact that people in the United States are living longer, research on the learning projects of the population of individuals 85 years old or older remains sparse and sporadic. The literature that does exist debunks a number of common myths about aging and learning by establishing the following: adults aged 65 and over are a highly diverse population; three of four people over the age of 85 live "on their own" or in the community; nursing home stays average only 6 months; and many people over 85 remain healthy and able to think abstractly and engage in learning projects. Numerous researchers have documented that elderly learners are capable of engaging in lifelong learning through self-initiated learning projects. Research has also confirmed that engaging in learning projects in later life is linked to the families, lifestyles, values, society, and the larger community. The fact that many of the "oldest old" adults still remain active learners in various ways, through reading, learning projects, and travel, is confirmed by the experiences of a sample 24 adults over 85 who were interviewed about their learning and reading projects during the past year. (Contains 29 references.) (MN)

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LEARNING PROJECTS OF THE ACTIVE AGING EIGHTY-FIVE AND OVER POPULATION IN THE UNITED STATES

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Learning Projects of the Active Aging Eighty-Five and Over Population in the United States

ABSTRACT

People in the United States are living longer, yet research on the learning projects of the age 85 and over population is sparse and sporadic. This paper presents some myths and facts, summarizes the results from recent interviews and media sources on learning projects and draws some implications for adult education. It concludes that many people in this age group, across race, gender, ethnic origin, education, and income are "alive and well". They are engaging in diverse self-initiated learning projects. Continuous or lifelong learners are productive, connected to the community, and contribute to improving the social fabric of life in the United States.

Far from being a liability, as some writers espouse, the older adult has the potential to be a valuable resource to the life of the community. On the other hand, some people - somewhere along the line - stop learning and growing.

Gardner (1996) suggests that the key to self-renewal and life-long learning is to be interested. Keep a sense of curiosity. Discover new things. Care. Risk failure. Reach out.

This paper explores the potential among the age 85 and over population and at the same time recognizes some limitations.

This paper: 1. Is limited to exploring the population in the United States. It does not necessarily apply to other countries and cultures. 2. Recognizes that a portion of this age group are not physically/mentally able to engage in learning projects; and, 3. Recognizes that all people in this age group are not life-long learners even though there is nothing to prevent them from engaging in learning projects (except maybe themselves).

Myths and Facts

Myth The age 65 and older over population are a homogenous cohort and can be considered as such for purposes of public policy, research, education or learning, and social services.

Fact The age 65 and over population are a highly diverse population (as is the age 85 and older) and, if national projections are correct, will increase in its diversity along lines of gender, race, ethnic origin, ability and income.

By way of perspective, the following chart provides a population profile by age.

Residents of United States Age 85 and Over, 1992

Age	Number
85 - 89	2,162,000
90 - 94	834,000
95 - 99	217,000
100 and over	45,000

Source: U.S. Department of Commerce, Statistical Abstract to The United States, 1994

Myth There is a consensus among researchers about the "correct" terminology for the life stages for the elderly.

Fact Viewpoints on the aging population are changing fairly rapidly as new research is conducted and published. For example, Sheehy (1995) proposes the following terminology:

Sage Seventies
Uninhibited Eighties
Nobility of the Nineties
Celebratory Centenarians

Alternate Proposed Schematic

Age	**Stage in Life**
50 - 64	Late Middle Age
65 - 74	Younger Older Adult
75 - 84	Older Adult
85 and Over	Older Older Adult

Source: Krothe (1990) and Beaty and Wolf (1996)

Myth Most people age eighty-five and over are in nursing homes.

Fact Three out of four are not in nursing homes but are living "on their own" or in the community. This is often with the support of family, friends, neighbors, community social services such as home health care, assisted living units, retirement centers, adult day care programs, etc. This population benefits from community based services that are the right service to the right person, at the right location, at the right time, at the right price. (Indiana State Department of Health)

Myth Nursing homes are a place to go to die.

Fact While true for some older adults, nursing homes are in theory and policy a place to recuperate from hospital stays, or have medical problems or transfer from other programs. The average length of stay is about six months. Recent data suggest that about twenty-two percent of discharges in any one year return to the hospital for additional medical care, about thirty percent are discharged to family or self (their own living quarters), about twenty-five percent die, the rest are discharged to "other", a generic category including home health care, other facilities etc. (Indiana State Department of Health, 1993) More definitive data on a national level should be available as a new federal requirement is implemented termed "minimum data set".

Furthermore, most studies indicate that about twenty-five percent are inappropriately placed in nursing homes and would not be there if community based services were available. (Indiana State Department of Health)

Krothe (1990) suggests that the older adult does not fear death so much as the unsettling

fear of: 1. Loss of independence i.e. regimentation in a nursing home or other facility, 2. Loss of treasures and possessions, and 3. Loss of social interaction with extended family and friends. Alternately, the motto of the Gerontological Society of America is: "Add life to years, not years to life."

Myth The age eighty-five and over population have lost the ability to think abstractly and engage in learning projects.

Fact Latest research indicates that the brain is amazingly flexible and capable of making electrical brain cell connections up to the point of death i.e. if reasonably health, the older adult is capable of learning till the point of death. Sheehy (1995) puts this concept in the following words: "If every day is an awakening, (spirit, integrity), you will never grow old, you will just keep growing."

Myth People age eighty-five and over are not healthy.

Fact A large portion of this population are still in good health, perceive themselves to be in good health, and are "on the go" and into learning projects, volunteering for not-for-profit organizations, or working at their chosen profession.

One study (Schoenfield 1994) suggests that if people in this older age group perceive themselves to be in good health then they are in good health. The author claims this to be the number one predictor of continued good health, even higher than a thorough medical exam. All five of Schaefer's (1995) study rated themselves in excellent health on a five point scale. About 85 percent of non-institutionalized representative sample of the age 75 and over population in Indiana reported that their health was excellent or very good or good (Behavior Risk Facts

Surveillance System 1995)

An article in *The New Yorker* (Gladwell 1996) discusses the probability of living longer and some of its adverse consequences and concludes: "In old age we really don't want to get rid of the diseases that kill us before we get rid of the diseases that slow us down, that rob us of our independence, that put us at the mercy of someone else."

Myth A deciding and overriding "worry" of our time is the "greying of America".

Fact Despite the "news grabbing headlines" the greying of America theme is grossly misunderstood and misstated. The age eighty-five and over population is growing in numbers but needs to be put into proper perspective.

This paper suggests that the active aging population is a valuable resource to their communities, are continuous learners, productive in their chosen areas of interest, connected to their family and extended families and the community and contribute greatly to improving the social fabric of society.

We should get beyond the financial implications of the social security issue. We should provide the necessary social services to sustain the older adult and we should join in celebrating the lives of the older adult and turn our attention to other issues that are vital to the survival of our planet.

Learning Projects

Havighurst (1973) noted that we learn our way through life, that "living is learning, and growing older is learning." This paper illustrates that learning projects or continuous learners are common and pervasive in the culture of the United States. Some people are "living, learning and

growing" well into their 90's.

Tough (1971) initiated the ground breaking research on self-initiated learning projects. Other research on the topic of learning projects has validated the main results of Tough's work. Tough defined learning projects as a series of planned events over a period of time of at least seven hours duration initiated by the individual with the motivation to gain and retain certain knowledge or skills or to produce some other lasting change in the learner.

Penland replicated Tough's work in Southern Appalachia and found similar results. His conclusion was that about 75% of the American population perceived themselves to be continuing learners and involved in self-initiated learning projects. The learners studied had initiated from 1 to 8 projects per person and averaged 3.3 per person. The mean number of hours was 155. (Penland, 1979)

Candy (1991) offers suggestions to foster autonomy within the learner. The goal is to "encourage self-direction" and ultimately to "involve the learners in acting autonomously". She provides a profile of the autonomous learner including 134 "attributes, characteristics, qualities, and competencies" clustered into 13 groupings.

The AAACE and ERIC (1994) collaborated to update and provide insights into the phenomenon of self-initiating learning projects. Beatty and Wolf (1996) do an admirable job of exploring the life and challenges of the older adult population. They examine the principles of education and learning projects of the older adults themselves as well as for all of us who wish to relate to older adults as family members, friends, service providers, and caring professionals. Brookfield (1997) presents a summary of the theory and practice of self-directed learning.

This segment of the paper explores learning projects in the age eighty-five and over population in the United States by two methods: (1) interviews with a sample of active 85 and older adults and (2) systematic review of news media interviews with the older adult.

In fact, one can note many age eighty-five and over adults in the United States who are still active and engaged in highly defined self-initiated learning projects.

Frank Lloyd Wright (at age 92) was still actively engaged in creative efforts in his chosen field of architecture.

Elton Trueblood (age 92), just prior to his death, this Quaker Theologian was still writing a national newsletter and conducting a weekly prayer meeting with residents of his retirement home.

Malcolm Knowles, prior to his death at age 85, was "still going" and making contributions to the field of adult education as an adult educator par excellence.

James Michener, just prior to his death at the age of 90, completed his latest book "This Noble Land: My Vision for America".

As this paper suggests, in addition to such luminaries, ordinary people are engaging in self-initiated learning projects.

Lifestyles of the Successfully Oldest-Old

Learning does not occur in a vacuum. It is linked to families, lifestyles, values, society, and the larger community. Thus it is necessary to provide a glimpse of the learning environment and lifestyle of the learner, instead of isolating the learning itself.

The five participants in the study by Schaefer (1995) were at least eighty-five years of age

and were living independently in a retirement center. The researcher used open ended questions, tape recorded, transcribed the interviews and took notes.

Lifestyle

Results of these five interviews indicate that they preferred to live separately but in close proximity to relatives i.e. "intimacy at a distance". Although adult children were the primary source of social support, other relatives, friends, and neighbors were also an important component of the support. They continued to be active socially.

They were maintaining a high level of volunteerism, charitable activity, and community work. They were very knowledgeable about current events, locally, nationally, and world wide.

Religion was an important part of their lives and most were actively involved with church groups and had attended church in the previous two weeks.

Education was an important variable in their lives (all but one was a college graduate). All continued to pursue life-long learning in numerous ways.

All achieved the "integrity" (vs. despair) that Erikson sees as signifying a healthy "late adulthood" and were actually pursuing "generativity" (vs. stagnation).

Using McClusky's Power-Load-Margin model as detailed by Main (1979), Schaefer found all participants in the study had a margin within which to pursue an active lifestyle. All were financially secure, currently in good health, with good family relationships, and had compiled a wealth of life experiences. This margin gave them the latitude necessary to continue to learn, give of themselves, and enjoy life.

Lifestyle and Learning Projects

The oldest-old were still active learners in a variety of ways, through readings, learning projects, and travel. They had sustained their curiosity about life, and continued to satisfy their curiosity through learning. All learning projects and reading material described by the participants was for the past year.

1. S.K. Age eighty-eight, Female

Reads biographies and historical studies, newspapers thoroughly. She likes to keep up on what is happening, especially likes to read editorials, still does volunteer work and runs errands for family members. She reads about 12 - 15 books a year and has a fax to communicate with her son in Tokyo. Her son is trained as a classical musician, thus her interest in attending concerts. She is on the board of Riley House that meets twice a month, visits museums and attends a study group that meets once a month. This year the study group engaged in a year long learning project about women in history. Her assignment was Mrs. F.D.R. Roosevelt.

2. C.R. Age eighty-five, Male

Saw a civil war movie but that didn't satisfy his curiosity so he got a civil war book to read. He also read a book on John Dillinger to refresh his memory in order to respond to questions from his daughter. Goes to church and sometimes a seminar group and Masonic functions once a week. Reads 2 - 3 books a year. Still active although he had a "little" heart attack in the past five years and one "small" stroke and had to learn again to walk and talk and passed it off as a minor. He exercises at the gym each day (swimming and walking).

3. F.W. Age eighty-nine, Male living with wife.

Up at 6:00 A.M. Reads the paper, mail, goes to the library to research topics (new drugs, chemistry). His wife had a stroke but recovered and he has recently recovered from cancer. Reads scientific news, subscribes to about four magazines (e.g. U.S. News and World Report, N.Y. Times). Rents audio books for his wife. Sends letters to friends via audiotapes. Lectures at the hospital using chemistry and physiology background, watches public television. He sums up his life saying "I'm interested in everything, my whole life I have been filled with curiosity."

4. S.L. Age ninety-one, male living with wife

Up at 6:00 A.M., goes to gym at 8:00 A.M. - spends afternoon reading, sings in the choir, attends Saturday morning Gideon meeting and as part of the Gideon Society, reads the Bible completely though each year, reads over 100 books a year. Read a book on the Klondike gold rush and then took a trip to Alaska and followed the path taken by the prospectors. High school graduate and worked in maintenance department of a university.

5. Bob M. Age eighty-five, male

Up at 6:00 A.M. Reads westerns - 50 a year and the daily paper, volunteers at a nursing home to host bingo, goes to senior citizen center dinner, and plays cards. Goes to church services periodically, attends social activities at church, and enjoys working with young people. Still loves to dance "as soon as the music starts, my feet start". Travels in a motor home yearly to visit relatives/family in Texas, Oklahoma, and California.

Learning Projects Using Media Sources

The following news media clips were collected over the past year. Although most media

sources are from Indiana, the people quoted are from different states. The age limit need not be arbitrary to make the point of the study. All subjects were not only actively engaged in positive life experiences but also involved in self-initiated learning projects.

1. Helen H. (Age ninety-five)

"93-year-old Woman Keeps up on Her Writing" Lifelong interest in books and writing, maintains active social life and still passes driving-test. Still writes for and published in the Vevay, Indiana newspaper. (Indianapolis News 5-9-96)

2. Ralph L. (Age ninety-five)

"Oldest Living Consultant Keeps on Ticking" Still does market research and is a life-long learner while he works with business clients. So that clients won't be put off by his age, he carries a letter from his physician stating that "the above remains in excellent health without restrictions mentally or physically". (Indianapolis Star 8-11-96)

3. Anne C. (Age eighty-seven)

"Illinois Runner Leaves Her Colleagues' Records in the Dust". Anne C. led a sedentary life style until age sixty-nine. Then she joined the YMCA and was off and running. She now teaches aerobics classes and runs 5K (3 mile) races. (Indianapolis Star 7-21-96)

4. Gordon P. (Age eighty-three)

"He refuses to Limit Himself" "I'm a Better Writer, a Better Photographer, a Better Musician - a Better Everything". A high school drop out but holds 28 honorary degrees and received the National Medal of Arts in 1988. Today he is completing a piano sonata and working on a book to

accompany a 1997 Retrospective of his work at The Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. (Parade Magazine 7-21-96)

5. Barb A. (Age eighty-five)

"Gift Eases Climb to Higher Education". Barb A. was not a college graduate. Her life long career was primarily as a secretary, but she recognized the importance of a college education. She helped her nieces and nephews financially in their quest for a college degree. Then she learned about scholarships, trusts, and wills and established a scholarship fund at a local university. (Indianapolis News 7-22-96)

6. Owens W. (Age ninety-four)

"94-year Old Man Knows Value of Education". Owens was a former baseball player who this year received an Honorary General Education Diploma after being tutored for two years. His tutor calls him "a life-long learner". (Indianapolis News 7-26-96)

7. Gerda B. (Age eighty-three)

"Painters Renaissance Woman's Interest in Water Colors Blooms Eternal after Discovery of a Long-forgotten Work of Flowers Inspires Her to Create Remembrances of German Home". She says "I just enjoy being able to paint again after all these years, or show them to people and give them as gifts to friends". Gerda is still learning techniques and style. (Indianapolis News 4-4-96)

8. Johnson P. (Age ninety)

"Built to Last" Johnson is a world famous architect. He still has projects in various stages of development all over the world and is still a continuous learner by applying new ideas to his projects. (New Yorker 6-6-96)

9. Tasha T. (Age eighty)

"Vermont Woman is a Late-Blooming Icon" Tasha is still writing and plying her craft. She is a children's author, illustrator, gardener and craftswoman and lives a "back to the land" 1800's lifestyle. "My lifestyle is perfectly normal". (U. S. Express in Indianapolis Star & News 5-28-96)

10. William S. (Age eighty-seven)

"Age Fails to Deter Determined Octogenarian With Dream". William was ordained a priest 20 days from his 80th birthday and is still a practicing Roman Catholic priest. As to the difficulties that he encounters he says "Old age ain't for sissies". (Indianapolis News 5-5-96)

11. Barton S. (Age ninety)

"City's Last Democratic Mayor Reaches Another Milestone Today: He Will Celebrate 90th Birthday". Studies for and passes drivers license exam, still enjoys politics and is still consulted for his opinion, plays golf three times weekly, meets with old friends and watches sports on television. (Indianapolis Star 6-23-96)

12. Clampitt (Age ninety-nine)

"Woman, 99, Warns Against Scam Artists". A reluctant hero who learned a hard lesson and helped others learn what not to do. Caught in a home-improvement scam, she helped police catch the scam artists, went public, and agreed to appear on the television show Dateline to tell her grim story of how unsavory service men try to take advantage of older people. (Indianapolis News 1-30-96)

13. Peterson, R.T. (Age eighty-seven)

"Peterson was Pioneer in American Birding" Until his death he was still alert, sketching

birds, revising range maps, consulting, learning and writing. (Indianapolis Star-News 8-11-96)

14. Herman B. (Age ninety-four)

Herman is a former president of a university in the Midwest. He remains busy, down-to-earth, and loyal to his friends and the university. The interviewer remarked that Herman's "fervor for learning hasn't diminished." He says that he has no time for reliving the past, its over, today is what matters. A student reads the newspaper to him as well as his mail and Herman answers every letter. He can't remember the last time he watched television. (Indianapolis Star 10-20-96)

15. Isaac Drew (Age ninety-four)

"Salt of the Earth May be Indiana's Oldest Working Farmer" Gets up at 4:00 A.M. because he hates to miss a sunrise or a moment of the morning's work. Still reads farming magazines and listens to music on his victrola, he has no answering machine, no VCR, no computer, no cellular phone, or beeper, wrist watch or credit cards. Isaac, as well as most of the people quoted, is a good example of "intimacy at a distance." He lives alone since his wife died but his daughter is just down the road and his son lives nearby. Mr. Drew died shortly after this paper was written. (Indianapolis News 10-19-96)

16. Millie B. (Age ninety-one)

Millie is the author of twenty Nancy Drew mystery books. At age eighty-eight she was nominated and elected to Ohio Women's Hall of Fame. She learned to fly at the age of sixty-eight and still has a pilot's license and flew at age ninety. At the age of eighty-five she took a river voyage in Central America in a motorized canoe. She still works and learns, while writing a column for seniors titled "On the Go" for the weekly *Blade*. She is resilient as shown by the fact that she broke

her leg, was off work for only a week, and then went back to work with a cast on her leg and using a walker. (Indianapolis Star 10-20-96)

17. Jimmy D. (Age eighty-six)

"Retired Teacher Revels in Memorabilia" After his wife died and he retired he was adrift so he started playing golf. Then he began deciphering and recording the names and dates of the county's many tombstones. He studied the operation of local museums in the state and then helped found The Ohio County Historical Society Museum. He put most of his numerous collections together himself. (Indianapolis Star 10-26-96)

18. Robert J. (Age one hundred and two)

"Centenarian Provides Role Model to Getting Along" Robert J. is a volunteer foster grandfather. He's passing on the lessons he's learned about respect for others by trying to help incarcerated juvenile offenders straighten out their lives. He began volunteering at the juvenile center at age eighty-seven. He's had very little formal education but uses the Bible in his mentor relationships. The Bible is the only book he ever read. (Indianapolis News 12-6-96)

19. Louise D. (Admits to being in her eighties)

"Fulfillment in Music and Words" Well into her eighties, Louise is still studying, writing, publishing, and teaching literature. A former concert violinist, she still plays the piano. She says "I don't feel retired. I don't feel my age." In her view living well requires doing something creative and productive. Next spring, *Modern Age* will publish her latest article on Edwin Robinson, the Maine poet. (Indianapolis Star 12-22-96)

Conclusions

The age sixty-five and over population is not a discrete entity but a highly diverse population as is the age eighty-five and over population. Three of four are not in nursing homes but living "on their own" or with a support group and a community network of social services. Even as one ages, the brain is highly flexible and continues to have the ability to input new information and make learning possible. We should explode the myths about this age group any way and any where we can.

The U.S. Census reports that high school drop outs have a shortened life span and may never reach age eighty-five. Thus, we need to start promoting learning at a young age both to foster a more productive life and to increase the probability of healthy older age.

Some of the older active adults will require community based resources to enhance their lifestyle. We should actively promote the provision of these resources for this age group so that people can lead a more satisfactory life during the later years.

We should petition and request and demand that more data on older adults should be included in the Bureau of U.S. Census and other databases to allow us to pursue the issues raised in this paper.

Implications for Adult and Continuing Education

A large portion of the age eighty-five and over adult population in the United States are engaging in highly deliberate self-initiated learning projects. We would do well not to automatically exclude the eighty-five and over but be willing to be a resource person for self-initiated learning projects. At this age, and in the adult years, most learning occurs outside formal academic settings

through an ever changing need to master the art of living and meeting the demands of the adult life.

Some literature rightly captures the life and learning projects of the older adult (Buhler, Erickson, Tough, McClusky, Friedan, Beatty and Wolf). "To live is to learn" and this population has a wealth of life experiences that would enable them to be a resource for others. However, some of the literature and research on life stages needs revision.

This study and similar work could enable us to better understand our own relationships to older persons and to our own aging process so we can lead a more satisfactory life ourselves today and place the earlier years of the life span in proper perspective.

To indicate how times have changed, the motto "The best is yet to be - maybe" is appropriate for this age group. It was first used as a motto for early and middle adulthood by Troll in the Lifespan Development Series published in 1975.

In summary, the active older adult portrayed in this study could be characterized by the terms resilient, flexible, intellectual, and socially active life-long learner, curious, well organized and connected to family, friends, the community and world.

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